

AFTER THE SNOW

POEMS

Steven Frattali

THE BANYAN PRESS

of

TAIPEI

2010

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AFTER THE SNOW

The snow fell through the night, night-long,
The deepest snowfall of the year.
By dawn it covered everything,
Pearl gray unfolding everywhere
As light leaked inward from beyond
Through curtained distances of gauze.
Since there was hardly any wind
Snow-feathers fell straight down in bars,
White, crystalline, and beautiful.
Both beautiful and delicate,
They held the world completely still;
No one was out or ventured out.
At first no prints or tire tracks
Marked here from there; then gradually
The storm died down to drifting flakes,
Some shovellers came out to see
The sky, directionless and gray,
The small sun floating in deep mist,
Diminished, vague, and far away,
The world laid bare and slightly lost.

A PLACE

First wash of dawn light
Over red-tinted earth.
Now the world is still,
As though trapped in amber.

Chimneys and bright metal rooftops
Are flooded with insubstantial gold.
It shines at their edges,
A river around small islands.

O sun in your great circle,
Where do you come from and go?
We stand here watching, tiny,
Dark, at the outermost edge.

AN APPLE TREE

Now in spring sunlight the apple tree
Is bright with white and opal blossoms.
Rough boughs are pewter and wet charcoal,
Knobbed and knuckled, thorned, segmented.

And the apple tree is like a web.
It glistens catching the sun's light,
Holding it in a seen pattern
As airily gaping as it is precise.

Canes and ridges of extruded ash,
Small trunk and branches, this tough life,
Combine with light and numbered
Pattern, motion, stillness, delicate color...

Designs of beauty: the entire tree
Letting us see it, and see all,
Bearing vision, letting our seeing live,
Bearing white blossoms, letting its fruit fall.

ARISTA

The beard of ripened wheat

Arista

awn

The bristle of the grain

And the wheat is shaken from the husks by wind

By wood

by threshing

by my hand

By wind

by our hands

By wind

by water

and by fire

And the wheat

the ripened kernel

the grain's heart

Left in my open palm

Falls to the threshing floor

The wheat dust blown away

Awn

arista

everything

Held for a moment

in a sieve of light

ASTRONOMICAL TWILIGHT

The air is absolutely clear, and cold,
The sky at early evening a deep blue,
Brown smoke is rising straight up from a flue.
The hills are turning black and the light gold.
And then a star is bright above the green
And yellow ember glow, still burning there
Where chimney smoke is smudged on darkening air
And opposite the rising crescent moon.
I see the glimmering fields spread out beneath
The constellations of the winter sky
Which astronomical twilight brings up high
And clear, and see the faint smoke of my breath.
The earth is darkening and freezing. Light
Is nearly all reflection, now that it's nearly night.

THE BEGGAR

I

Cold breath smoke.
Sun crack at the hill's edge.
And my two feet are frozen.

I wish I could open
The sun door wider.

II

Mid-day.
I raise my arms
Toward the sky,
Now nothing in my hands
But light.

III

Evening.
O shadow,
How far you reach!

In the Bower

I

Shrill wind outside, below zero wind-chill.
But here there's a space heater going:
Electric coils burning orange
In the dark room. Brown twilight. Long silences.
Hot metal ticks now and then.
The reading lamp spills pale ginger ale light
On your page, on your hand.

II

Closing my eyes
I see your face
Opening my eyes
I see your shoulder your hair

Closing my eyes
On your hair
Opening my eyes
To find your face

III

On the edge of sleep.
Rushing syllables crying in the wind outside.
But smiling, with one thought,
I draw you back.

Empty Books

We can't hold the falling leaves
In our four hands.
I try to capture them, absurdly
Hugging piles to myself.
They only fall right through
The hoop of my two arms.

They fall away from me
Like tatters,
Like stray papers blown about.
The two of us stoop after them
But only knock our heads.

I've read of all the figures
In the antique books,
Great heroes, ancient wars
And lots of them.

Some men are made for fighting,
Some for nothing in particular.
And even the fighters have their day.
But I have read the dark words
Written in the ancient texts.

The last page is a blank,
But it isn't for your notes.
This is the note you need instead,
An empty page for all the empty books.

An Empty Hand

I Karate Dojo, Early Morning

Open the wooden door
That clicks shut behind you.
Bare footsteps echo.

Morning light
Across floorboards.
Greatest of masters.

II Forms Practice

Training at early morning.
Our shadows so huge
In slanted light.

III To My Sparring Partners

Karate is
Motion plus emotion,
The master said.
For you, brothers,
May the path be endless.

Flowering Cherry at Night

Shadow

Leaves flutter and shiver
In the moonlit wall,
Whitewash and green moonlight,
And the black lilacs rustle and stir
In the awakening chill night.
Wind blows, and the shadow of wind,
Petal on petal is falling now,
Flaking from the shadow bough.
The April moon is on the dusty grass.
The cherry tree is wet with moonlight
And night dew.

The cold dew shines,
The spider thread and spittle of moonshine
Webbing the tree; and the others come out
From where they had hidden
So deep in the night,
From the tree's depth of shadow,
Their voices in silence
And footsteps now walking the unbroken dew,
Fallen petals like snow still untouched.

The world that we know
Is only the thinnest crust.
Dew is cold to the touch
In the dark wet grass.
Soon more rain
Will come and the blossoms will melt like snow,

Will fall to the grass
As the snow did itself only a short time ago.
Voices in silence, their footsteps weightless in
moonlight.

And the great circle glitters like dust.
Yet I cannot repeat
What has happened again and again.
The April moon is on the dark spring grass.

Great Oak at Evening

It is late summer

The dusty-lighted sunset of summer evening

The burning and half-charred tree line
 Black rooftops of houses,
 and the steeple corroded in glare

Towering cumuli of pink and copper and yellow
orange

Along the naked edge of the earth
 now turned just a crack

The powers have entered --
 sudden annunciations,
Blind spots, beaming spotlights through the leaves

Great arms of the oak tree
 cross-beamed with deepening light,
 the late, the quiet and haunted light,
 gnat-clouded, gold

Smolder of light bars shining through and through

The back-lit tree is a honeycomb of the sunset

And the green crown is rippling, light-
shadowed

Weightless
substanceless
matter

Futureless
pastless
time

Later Stanzas

I

How many grains of rice
In my steaming bowl of soup?
There must be a number.

II

Evening recedes. Ebb-tide of light
From the beach of the world.
Sand bars of golden cloud.

III

I wake in the night.
In the dark I see tall shapes
Standing. Gift bringers!

Movie Going

With what fondness we remember
Our first movie going. In memory
I observe that scene and think, When was it?
Was I there? Although I remember the father --

A dark authorial presence
Somewhere behind and to one side,
Like an impresario in the wings.
Sometimes a moving shadow: heavy mandible of
forearm,

Or, suddenly, a rippled looming head,
Or a shadow's tilted eminence, impending,
Along the grey periphery
Of the living room's dim ceiling --

A technical adjustment -- one slide
Then quickly, unceremoniously removed
To a sound like automatic doors,
A clicking open and clicking shut,

Emergency room doors
Or a counter of some kind -- or a knife being
sharpened? --

And then a sudden blank,
All white and glaring hotly.

But restoration followed: blue sky again,
And trees, a car, some children and adults
Standing beside it, smiling,
Waving in the clear spring day, immobile.

The images are different now.
Alien and curious, just as though I were
A visitor from somewhere else, from somewhere
In the wings, I went the other night.

It was a box traversed,
Divided by a beam of light.
In the beam a steady seepage of bright dust
Was falling and falling, turning ceaselessly.

Light particles, I thought. But then it seemed
That there were really strings
And dusty cords
Woven into cables of blue light

Now pulling absolutely taut
From the weight of the enormous images
Which filled the screen,
Itself the size of two billboards.

I thought then of an elevator car
Seen from outside and high above
As it hurtles down and down
And down an endless elevator shaft,

Falling terrifyingly fast,
And the cables were a spider's filaments
Stretched out so fine and far
And barely holding on.

The millstone of the weightless images
Dropped like a bank safe
Through this bright cobweb,
Leaving the projector's lens a world behind.

And then I thought perhaps
The screen, the imaged wall,
The roof of the falling car
Was just the square base of an hour glass

Whose unseen globe or bulb --
Immaterial, conceptual, mathematical --
Expanded about us in the dark room,
Expanded outward to infinity.

The particles of light
Were the hour glass's sands
Pouring down and pouring over us,
A pyramid or cone of light

Expanding, mounting higher, higher
And beyond the dark walls of the theatre,
Filling the whole world
With bits and crumbs of radiance,

Like particles of broken glass,
Like the mirror surfaces of banks,
Like neon in the downtown street,
Like shattered glass along the sidewalk

Where I walked home later on that night.

This Is Not a Poem

Far in the south
A little girl -- brown skin,
Mud in her hair,
A kind of sack for a dress,
No shoes --
Walks down a muddy road.

Jeep tires have made gutters in the mud
Along one side. Along the other.
Then down the middle in a swooping swerve.

She remembers shouts and screams. Other things.
Then she forgets them again.

Now it's no longer raining, but hot.
Smoke and mist hang drifting
Along the ridge of the bright green hills.
Sun and flies.

She is walking toward
A muddy yard, two shacks,
And a clothesline with colored rags.
In her whole life
She has never had
Enough to eat.
Will she ever?

Meanwhile north
In the enlightened world
They are talking.
Freedom, they say. Freedom.

Freedom. Freedom. Freedom.

Words and images
Accumulate
Like dust in corners
Or like fallen snow
Or leaves, dead leaves.

Or else
Like playing cards thrown down,
Deployed to make
A tilting tower of cards --
Deep black, and red, deep deep red --
Club and Ace, sharp Diamond
And splendid, laughing Jack,
Teetering higher and higher
Over the game board
Of the world.

A Love Supreme

You come to me
and I am waiting here

My study of silence
in the silent study
Of my room
myself
outside, the summer night

And there is music present
In the time that it makes palpable

Filling it
as water fills a stream bed

As the current fills the water

As water fills the fountain where it rises, falls

And so we become each other
I you
And you, likewise, me

This -- the always vanishing
ungraspable, yet touched

You come to me and I am waiting here

By passions our life is bound and by passion it is
released

THE OLD CITY

Sometimes you say, I'll leave here,
I'll get totally away,
And in some other place things will turn out well.
How sure of this in some moods,
At some odd moments, one can feel.
It seems so strange to say,
Yet there it is. You actually
Do feel this way.
The absolute purity of the bright blue sky --
So deep, so empty, and so clear,
Even where the city blocks it off with some old
building --
Must play a role in this, that mood of longing
For departure, confident, however strangely,
Of renewal or, even more absurdly,
Of triumph in return.

Then,
Everything, you feel,
Is wrong and fated somehow to remain that way.
Your heart, your dead heart,
Seems sunken six feet in its grave -- discouragement,
Disappointment, loneliness and boredom
Bury it and keep it there.
How long can this go on, you say.
Everything here is dead, is ruined.
The years I've spent here
Seem absolutely wasted.
This is the mood that feeds your longing
To leave for anywhere -- somewhere --
Just to get away.

You know it won't work, though.
You won't find anything that's better there,
Wherever that might be. There isn't
Any promised land. The place you've lived in,
Which memory has taken up and duplicated
In its own discerning subtle ways,
So devious, encompassing, so timeless and time-
drenched,
Will always stay with you --
The old and fateful city
That by now you've learned by heart,
That is your heart, your life itself, in some
mysterious way.

You'll walk the same streets,
Sit in the same squares
Where evening stretches out its shadows,
Where dusty light is slanted, tinted copper-red,
So deeply haunted with the past
It fills your heart to overflowing
In so many ways you can't express,
Both good and bad.

You'll walk the same streets,
Visit the same old neighborhoods,
Getting older every day, both you and they.
This is your fated place
You'll gradually begin to see. This city,
Never chosen, which was choosing you
Even as you thought to get away,
Is where you'll always be.
The failures and discouragements,
The loneliness, the boredom, perhaps some few good
things,
Are with you everywhere,
No matter if it's there -- but where? -- or here.

Reverdie

The spring's warm weather blows into my heart,
Opening pages as it agitates the leaves
(That show their countless eyes, their countless
mouths
Whispering secrets in the rained-on tree).

New movement crowds the pages of my book.
I raise my hand (that now seems strange to me)
Feeling the light upon the back of it.
The light is rich this afternoon, and warm,

Haunted with infinite depth, and yet still clear,
Empty perhaps, yet radiant, streaming glare
Through cracking fissures of the maple's crown --

Openings from one book into another book,
Misstatements of beginning, where one ray
Pierces the side of one page through to the other
side.

Walking through the Dark

Passages always waiting for my step --
 Gateways through the overhanging leaflets
 Of October's midnight trees: green moonlight
 And zebra shadow-grillwork darkness.

I walk from frame to frame -- each sidewalk crack,
And sense the interstices of the film
(Which all flash by so infinitely fast)
Must hold the deep reality one feels

In glimpses of sudden clarity, or dreams.
Yet how can you approach it, here and now ?
Where shadow-doors from shadow-scrimmed tree
boughs

Are woven things, textiles of light and dark,
To touch perhaps, yet not to press beyond,
And so much more like things to be tangled in.

PASSAGEWAYS

The deep and gold October light
That filled our two high windows
In the later afternoon --
That's what I remember. Even now I still
Can see it as it falls across
Your face in profile
When you glance down at your papers,
And then back up at me.
And the red flowers on your desk -- roses or carnations --
Seemed to be crying out
In their own radiant
And silent world of light,
Ecstatically.
The two of us were sitting there
In a kind of haze,
A cubicle of honeycombed and slanting sun
Which streamed in through the two high, dusty panes.
It was our first real talk alone,
There in the office, in that high brick building
Which overlooks the busy street. Always
It seems it's somewhere filled with light --
Near doors and thresholds
Or bright windows of some kind --
That I remember you, and 'remember'
Isn't really the right word,
Since it suggests the past, and rather
What I feel is more a present thing, your luminous
continuing
Presence in my life. Where are we going, the two
Of us, and through
What doors or passageways?

It's true that we can't always say.
Still there is the single chain of moments
Radiant in my memory,
Still there are the flowers in their vase,
Still two voices in the sunlit room.

Past Sleep

I

Going to bed. Already thinking
Of what I'll be doing tomorrow.
Crowded-together days. Dim joy.

II

Light switch. And the bedside lamp
Fades into black. Nothing.
O the vastness of nothing!
And slowly there are four walls.

III

Morning. And I rise,
The small room
Enormous with sunlight.

IV

And the sun is in me
Somewhere, like a candle flame
Inside a candle.

V

Thinking past sleep
Into morning.

A Path

Sun spreading gold and crimson, and pink light
Pours on the tawny hill that's facing it.
I face it too, I walk straight into it.
I have to raise my hand before my face
To see the budding tree that's leaved in glare.
Because I cannot see that place beyond
The burning disk, just past the streaming hills,
Beyond the light, beyond the burnt-off edge
That marks the final boundary of thought,
The limit of all speech, and of desire,
Of aspirations, even the end of time,
Because I want to see that radiant place
Beyond the point of light, I go out now,
Out walking, walking, looking straight ahead,
Half blind yet trying still to see past the end.

A Reading Lamp

A cylinder of metal -- a trumpet
Of some kind, though a silent one.

Within: a bulb of light,
My flower of light
Whose stem drinks dark electric roots.

Here a stream of radiant dust
Is pouring
From the always dry canteen.

What would night be without you?
Dropping your circle of light, a theatre
Where my hand has blindly strayed,

My hand which now, at the bidding of my
eyes,
Will put you out.

Ring Around

We stand in your bedroom
In the light
Of this bright afternoon.

It's autumn and a cold breeze
Is blowing through the white curtains.

My two hands
Are grasping your hands,
And our arms
Are two parallel lines.
Where can they ever meet?
And yet they can never end.

It's autumn and a cold breeze
Is blowing through the white curtains.

Gold light through the pane:
Annunciations of silence and dust.
I see it in stripes on my shirt sleeve
And on your green blouse.

The gold light is warm
On my shoulder,
The rich light aflash
In your hair as we spin.
And you laugh. Yes, you're laughing,
And I'm laughing too.

It's autumn and a cold breeze
Is blowing through the white curtains.

Sleep

I

With an eye in my stomach
What would I dream?

II

Seeing -- a stone sunk past the surface.
Breathing -- spread of slow ripples on a pond.
Hearing -- an echoing well.

III

In sleep, the crowds gathering and gathering,
The press of the others.
In waking -- solitude.

IV

Sleeping together, dreaming separately, waking
alone.

V

Voices from day,
Sounds from the night,
Dreams out of silence.

VI

Tongue in the mouth
Searching for another mouth,
Fingers of the hand
Searching for another hand.

VII

Drinking sleep
From the cup of night,
A face
From the river of day.

VIII

Breathing -- wind in the trees.
Speaking -- the clatter of leaves.
The sound of my own voice in dreams,
Tangled root deep in earth.

IX

How many sounds are there in sleep?
The syllables of my name
In the other world?
When?

A Sleeper

Between just-parted drapes --
 two compass legs of light

This sleeper, in
Idea-drifting slumber, her Platonic bath

The world
Is the weight of her pillow, or less

I hear
Her barely-audible breathing

Now she gathers her new motivations

All from herself

From her being, non-being
From the real, the not real
 from the no-longer-quite

From the air, from light --
 from a body
In quest of itself

The act of her waking
Is many, not one

Yet still simply her

Sun flares along the edge of the blinds

Snapshot

It's morning and you rise. You shake your hair
And stretch yourself a bit, your elbows high,
Your blue night gown illuminated by
A slant of light that smolders in the air.

I want to keep you here just as you are --
Your smiling face and hair confused just so,
Your two bare feet that step so lightly through
The sun's pathway that cuts across the floor.

The floor is like a sun dial's burning face
Now held completely open to the sun,
No eye to close or gaze to turn away.

The walls mere walls, blinds sieve the streaming
day,
Yet day still comes, our burning time burns on.
How beautiful it is! -- this time, this place.

Thaw

Brown rushes lie almost flat
In the half-frozen swamp

In the early evening
Rain is melting old snow
And grey ice

Three crows settle
In a brown willow tree

Through stiff grey bushes
And through the cat tails
A warm wind blows

Time

Nearing my step into the other realm,
I dimly feel the limits of the world.

How strangely fast the seasons.
Yet all is still.

I feel my past so vaguely,
And as though with just fingertips.

Vestigia

In early autumn's gold and still warm
Sunshine, each falling leaf --
A moment of the world --
 caught in this light,
Adrift for seconds in unmoving air,
The red leaf drifting in warm light.

With me the world begins, with me it ends.

Now, after, before --
 Burning the instant never to return.
 What will there be, what be revealed,
 The ash burned down until there's nothing more?

Not seen, not heard,
The moment without substance
Dilates beneath my feet and closes over me.

The Visitor

I try to find the surface of the earth
Yet cannot touch beyond the mirror's glass.
The autumn light reflected in the pond
Is depths of surfaces and shimmerings of depth.

The world is always here, always this place,
And time is always now, only right now.
Yet now is never now and here is everywhere
And nowhere; the world is still unknown.

Where have I been? What is this place where I
Have suffered, wandering in ignorance,
Searching to find the one life briefly glimpsed
In dream, in memory, in hope, in fear?

Waiting for the Afternoon

The long slow hours of this afternoon
As I wait for the moment when the day
Might suddenly be more than life deferred,
More than that waiting absence, future tense,
A moment never to be realized.
Always this pleasure in the warm sunshine
That shines in casually, the morning's gift --
When to be there and breathing is enough,
Is to know life, the fullest depth of life,
This realization of a moment's chance --
The morning sunshine warm upon my hand --
And to want nothing but this moment now,
Just passed already as it is enjoyed,
Its one fulfillment nowhere in this world.

Winter Night Sky

I

Winter storm coming.

Tops of the trees
Rushing in the wind,

Branches of the trees
Swaying in the wind,

Roots of the trees
Waiting for the wind.

II

There. Brightest stars
So small in the cobalt sky.
And there the white
Full moon has risen from a chimney.

III

Angels and archangels
Of amethyst and diamond
Touching a throng of empty trees.

IV

Walking. Cold.
The stars shine so brightly.
My thoughts fill the night.

A Winter Sunset

There are others here, from beyond our world,
From the other one, high presences.
The earth, the stars, and the sky itself are their
speech.
Their speech is a silent speech, an inscription;
They are themselves their own speech in its silence.

This evening -- here and now -- I see
The orange, the gold and green light
Of winter sunset. And the bare hill,
Outlined in embers, red and brown,
Is trembling in the river's shining steel.

Bright opal of the winter moon
Is full and streaming light
Against the noble blue,
And there are tiny points of stars deep in the lake of
night.

AFTERWORD

Encounters With the Author in Taipei

We first made the author's acquaintance at a well-known restaurant in Taipei, the Wysteria Tea House, famous as having been a meeting place for dissident intellectuals in the years of political struggle in Taiwan .

During the recent effort to publish his rather extensive work, we had occasion to discuss aspects of his past and current writing.

Your poetry is quite varied in style and in form. Where do you locate yourself in the overall debate concerning poetic form?

I consider myself an eclectic. The main thing for me is to grasp, mentally, a certain object -- that is, an experience, a scene, an event -- to see it and feel it. Any language that seems to convey the reality of that is good, any which remains merely language, merely words, is for me of no interest, in some cases it is actively negative, in the sense of being obstructive.

A cliché?

Yes or not even a cliché but in a way worse than that. Much of our language obscures the nature of reality. Words in themselves are, in a sense, the enemy of writing. I tell students that all the time. Words most often merely convey the usual accepted social understanding. Writing is for the

purpose of grasping reality itself, which is always something other than the social understanding.

Do you consider yourself a political writer?

All writing is political in the sense of attempting to correct these false social understandings. At times its purpose is to merely reveal with a new freshness, a perceptual freshness, as it were. But even this itself has a certain basic political significance, in the sense that awakened human beings will act and think differently than those who are at rest in the normal tranquilized non-perception that we usually are caught up in.

Does living outside the United States help or hinder your writing?

I think it helps, in general. It is in some ways a very undeveloped culture, yet in other ways it is overbearing. (The US, that is.) There is, for example, a great deal of rather stifling political correctness, as it's called, and to get away from that is itself a positive thing. For a while I had no idea how I would ever get all this material published, especially if you're not there trying to do all the "networking" that is needed, and which I was absolutely terrible at anyway -- worse than terrible, I really had no clue, I still don't, I suppose. And then it came about that you could just do it all by yourself, by means of the internet.

How much material is it? It's quite a lot, it would seem.

Yes, I guess it's about 40 volumes or so. Over 2,000 pages, if you want to measure it like that. I don't know how much it would weigh.

There seem to be many styles represented. Was that something you consciously strove for?

Yes. I always wanted to be able to represent a wide variety of experiences. My first models for the artist were people such as Picasso, Goethe, Bach -- artists who could work in a very wide range of forms and even use widely different styles. Of course, I can't compare myself to people like that, but it was still a goal, to try many types of things.

What sorts of things are you working on currently?

Well as you know I am trying to get all this existing work published, going through it, touching it up here and there, proofreading, and so forth. After that, I think I might return to some translating work -- Holderlin especially, and some Chinese poets, but don't ask me which ones.

What were you trying to do in these poems in particular?

This volume seems to me to be transitional, an earlier period -- somewhat Romantic, almost Keatsian at times -- is changing to something else. There is an influence of Frost and Bishop, and my underlying Christian Platonism and Neoplatonism shows through.

About the Author

Steven Frattali is an expatriate American writer living in Taipei. He is the author to date of over 40 volumes of poetry, totaling over 2,000 pages of work. He is also the author of several critical works, among them *Person, Place and World: A Late Modern Reading of Robert Frost* and *Hypodermic Light: The Poetry of Philip Lamantia and the Question of Surrealism*.

About the Banyan Press of Taipei

The Banyan Press of Taipei was founded in 2008 by Samuel Palmer and Steven Frattali. It plans to publish the work of expatriate Anglophone writers of the Pacific Rim who are working outside the norms of mainstream publishing. The Press does not at this time invite submissions, but it hopes to do so in the future.

